

Vinegar Tom burns

Dal theatre does witch hunt justice

BY JANET FRENCH

Disturbing and intense, the Dalhousie Theatre Department presented *Vinegar Tom* at the Sir James Dunn Theatre, from November 23 to 27. Written by Caryl Churchill, a feminist playwright who has been described as a "post-modernist voice," *Vinegar Tom* takes us back to the 1640s, an era marred by false accusations of witchery.

Vinegar Tom plays out the drama of the expected trials and tribulations which arise in small town life. There are feuds between neighbors, unwanted pregnancies, and unhappy marriages in which a man could not muster the slightest erection to save his life. When the townsfolk encounter strife, they turn to Ellen, the local herbal remedies mistress who always has a potion for any problem, no matter how bizarre.

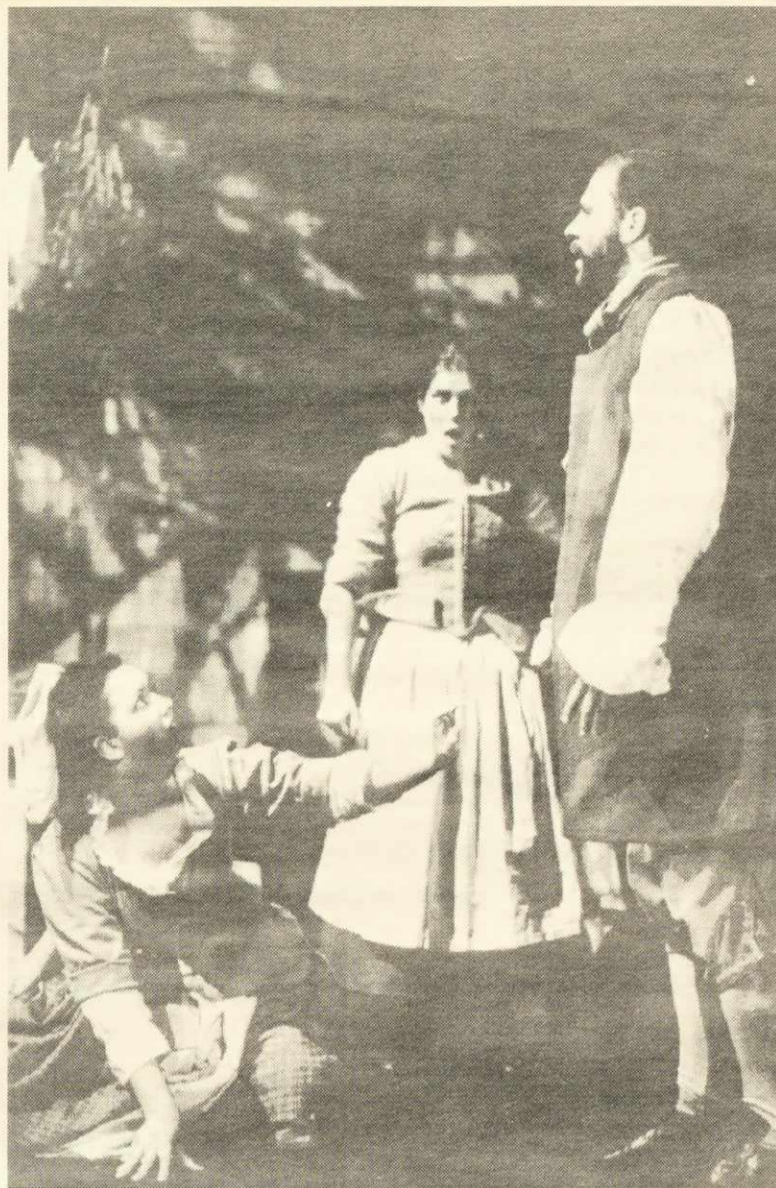
However, mere irritation evolves into finger pointing and paranoia. Soon, these God-fearing Christians are crying witch and succumbing to the terrifying trend which still makes Salem, Massachusetts one of the most notorious places in North America today. The witch hunts commence and this innocent town is transformed by terror.

Confusingly, there are intermittent interjections between scenes where swings descend from the ceiling, and some actors ditch the 17th century costumes for plainclothes. Brief songs are sang, usually related to the plot and often involving feminism, or lack thereof.

Although the acting in *Vinegar Tom* is good, there is something which was not quite right. Rumor has it the actors worked with a vocal coach to perfect the dialect of this small English town. The overly critical might say these dialects leave something to be desired. At times, some actors slipped out of their accents briefly, and others just sounded like they were from Texas. Sadly, this one essential detail is distracting and draws momentum away from the final product.

Costumes were somewhat lavish, but extremely well done. Costume designer D'Arcy Poultney is to be commended for her work on this production. Similarly, the set is versatile and well suited to this play. Simple but well-dressed, it allows room for copious amounts of people and multiple scenarios to occur synchronously.

One of the most striking characters in *Vinegar Tom* is Alice, the warm and personable young lady merely yearning for love. Julie Clifford plays a fabulous Alice, with appropriate amounts of enthusiasm and anger, which brings this character to life without nauseating melodrama. Kudos also to Craig Gunn's performance as Jack, a trou-



bled husband torn between duty to his family and the lure of a younger woman. Unlike other characters in this performance, Gunn filled the shoes of his character both in temperament and maturity.

Production details aside, *Vinegar Tom* is a truly troubling play.

The sorrow and anguish of the characters leaves an impact, and the violence against women is profoundly disturbing to say the least. The audience leaves appalled and disgusted, indicating the Dalhousie Theatre Department does this play justice.



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